

VZCZCXRO1703
RR RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHNEH
DE RUEHCI #0015 0191218
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 191218Z JAN 10
FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2537
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2441
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 1035
RUEHNEH/AMCONSUL HYDERABAD 0101
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 1038
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0648
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 3168

UNCLAS KOLKATA 000015

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/INSB (TITUS)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IN](#) [BD](#)

SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL LAYS FORMER CHIEF MINISTER JYOTI BASU TO REST

REF: Kolkata 4

¶1. (U) Jyoti Basu, former West Bengal Chief Minister and co-founder of the Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M), died January 17 in Kolkata. The 95 year old Basu succumbed to pneumonia after two weeks of hospitalization (Reftel).

¶2. (U) The West Bengal government closed on January 18 for the first of two official days of mourning. On January 19, thousands of people waited patiently to say their final good-byes to Basu as he lay in state in the State Assembly Building. Among those paying their respects were Sonia Gandhi, chair of the ruling United Progressive Alliance, and Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who flew to Kolkata from Dhaka specifically for the event. The entire state cabinet of Kerala, which like West Bengal is also led by the CPI-M, flew to Kolkata to mourn the loss of their comrade. Post's Acting ConGen laid a wreath and signed the condolence book. While public and private schools were closed, private sector establishments continued with business as usual. The city remained calm, life continued as before and in some quarters one would not have even known that the longest serving chief minister in independent India lay in state less than a mile away.

¶3. (U) Media reaction to Basu's death has been balanced, focusing on both his positive and negative contributions to India's political narrative. Journalists have acknowledged his role as a leading politician in post-Independence India, who created space for "the Left" in India and who may have had the chance to do more had the party allowed him to become prime minister in 1996. Obituaries have highlighted accomplishments such as land reform and introduction of local governance in the state, while simultaneously recognizing negative legacies such as strikes and labor destructions, politicization of the police force, an almost two-decade removal of English language instruction from government primary schools, and flight of industry from the state.

Comment

¶4. (SBU) Today, people in Kolkata and across the national political spectrum seem to be remembering and honoring Jyoti Basu more for the strong political leader that he was, and less for the ideologies or policies that he espoused. His narrative was an essential part of the Indian political one, just as

communism was part of the 20th century's. And at the viewing, one had to wonder whether the tears were being shed for the man who most recently passed, or for the movement whose time has come and gone. West Bengal will have to wait until 2011 to find out how many people Mamata Banerjee, Railways Minister, leader of the state's opposition party and Chief Minister-in-Waiting, was speaking for when she stated that Basu represents "the first and last chapter of the Left Front government" in West Bengal.

CUMMINS